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## WHERE PHILOSOPHY FAILS.

The conclusions of a layman who has spent more or less time very agreeably in the suburbs of the city of Philosophy can be of no value from a technical standpoint, but I venture to think that they may well enough express certain current lay criticisms upon philosophy as she is commonly promulgated which the technicians might afford to consider more seriously than they do.

My rambles in the aforesaid environs were inspired by the hope that I might find there the solution of some very vital practical problems involving those much disputed matters — right, justice, etc. And my difficulty is that now, finally, I have arrived at the commonplace conclusion that all serious philosophers are trying to formulate, each in his own way, the same root idea. Also I conclude that they more or less unconsciously desire controversy and do not desire agreement. If these conclusions are warranted it follows — in view of the natural ineffectiveness of lay arguments upon such points — that only those should speculate who can afford to do so for the undeniably great charm of the game. Nevertheless, before taking my own advice and going about my lay business, I give way to a perverse desire to say what I think must be in the minds of many laymen, however variously they might express themselves. And I shall say what I have to say more directly by being boldly personal.

The one somewhat variant aspect of my experience in these philosophical regions is that I have been led to form my judgments as to other men's convictions from their *actions* rather than from their *words*, where the choice is possible. Of course, we all do this largely, in point of fact, but we are apt to forget that we do it. I do not by any means impute conscious dishonesty to the professed pessimist, for example, who continues to live. I merely think that he allows his feeling to obscure his vision unduly. Just so, as long as I see men *act* as if the universe were One and somehow purposeful, I cannot take their materialistic or pluralistic professions very seriously. This attitude has no theoretical novelty, of course, but very few philosophers seem to adopt it practically. What sticks in my mind is that its adoption dissipates philosophical problems, and not to adopt it is neither rational nor common-sense-ical. The view is too simple and obvious to be popular; indeed, there seems to be in us humans an instinctive aversion to too much simplification. To urge this view is perhaps to give offence resultlessly: yet silence here is far from golden to the honest skeptic.

Every man's *actions*, then, reveal his conviction that the universe somehow hangs together in a way which he cannot grasp and yet dares not ignore. Also, and at the same time, his *actions* reveal his acceptance of himself, for

all practical working purposes, (not in the ultimate absolute sense,) as a genuine individual.

If men's actions do *not* reveal this acknowledgment of themselves from two flatly contradictory standpoints one would welcome examples of such failure. But if examples are not to be found then men's active acknowledgment of themselves as parts of a complete (i. e., a statical) whole must stand. Our behavior in this respect is not logical, of course; only the Whole could logically formulate the absolute. I do not know *how* or *why* our situation is thus out of all reason: I do not expect to know. I merely point to the undeniable fact that men accept their fate of finitude and work *as if* they were absolutely self-determining, knowing all the while that in the ideal ultimate sense they are not so. I urge, moreover, that they *must* do this thoroughly irrational thing or die—and when did a man die of a refusal to accept his contradictory fate?

Mr. Haldane, in his *Pathway to Reality*, says: "It is not necessary for the purposes of these lectures 'to determine' whether the full truth" can be exhibited in a system such as Hegel attempted. The remark is typical and one of a sort that seems generally to suggest the gratuitous implication that it is not necessary to determine for *any* purpose, whether the full truth can be exhibited by any finite system. But what we know, and what we habitually forget, is that by our acknowledgment of our finitude we have then and there, and by that sign, acknowledged that the full (i. e., the absolute) truth can *never* be determined by finite men. It is this hoping, against adverse certainty, that absolute truth may some day be attained by *men*, which, to the layman dabbling in philosophy, seems to be the root of much speculative evil. Our *actions*, then, acknowledge the absolute, alias the ideal, alias the *ought to be*, just as surely as they acknowledge the relative, practical *it is* of finitude.

Surely there is nothing obscure in the distinction between *working toward* what *seems* to be a goal, and *arriving at* what *is* a goal. To say that the ideal is unattainable is not to weaken the unaccountable yet undeniable authority of our ideal sense as giving us the direction in which our finite judgments should look.

And so in regard to "justice," etc., I see no difficulty. Such words have always *two* possible connotations, the one absolute, ideal, the other relative, practical. Real justice we attribute to the statical incomprehensible Absolute which our every action presupposes: the tentative working justice is reflected in man-made laws. I am not forgetting our multitudinous, more or less fleeting, private judgments as to what would most nearly satisfy our ideal sense of justice in this, that; or the other, finite case. I suppose that these judgments of the moment are what most men really have in

mind when they talk about "justice." But justice in this sense is obviously an unstable subjective affair, and the mere thought of a final criterion of such misnamed justice morally or legally obligatory upon others is repugnant even to common sense when it stops to reflect.

I am not doubting that these judgments are to be formed and *urged upon* others. Such judgments are the necessary raw material for the operation of a selective process the results of which, men being as they are, can be obligatory upon all only when they are duly erected into that *working* criterion which we call the law. All of these old trite truths remain. I merely emphasise the well-known but lightly-forgotten fact that the distinction between the absolute and the relative connotations of such words as justice, right, freedom, etc., is perfectly clear. No one ever knew this better than did Spencer, yet he said, in substance; Because the real absolute justice is not for us we might as well use the convenient term "absolute justice" to signify the *nearest approximation* to the genuine article that is conceivably compatible with finitude. So he planted his standard of "absolute ethics" and "absolute justice" *not* in the actually infinite (i. e., The Unknowable) where it belonged, but at an assumed limit of finitude. But after a few pages the mantle of real absoluteness had fallen upon his relative absolute. He nodded and presently awoke to find himself seated in the "tea-table elysium" together with ideally perfect *finite* men. I think that the chapter on "Absolute and Relative Ethics" (vol. I. *Prin. of Ethics*) warrants this characterisation. He there explicitly disavows reference to The Absolute when he uses the term "absolute"; not because The Absolute is not, for him, confessedly *there*, but because the conception of The Absolute is, *for us*, contradictory, and hence absurd. But, throughout, his perfect, ultimate finite man—that reconciliation of the statical and the dynamic—is as contradictory and inconceivable as is The Absolute. It is Spencer's inevitable and willing acknowledgment of The Absolute, with all of its contradictoriness *from our standpoint*, which finds utterance in his expression "absolute ethics."

I think there can be no doubt that Spencer had the right idea but was so much under the influence of his time, after all, that he could not keep clear of the hopeless attempt to formulate a completely logical finite system: and so he did not *say* what we may feel sure he *meant* to say.

Spencer's faith in an ultimate extension among all men of the filial and parental attitude is peculiarly un-Spencerian; yet that faith has influenced many excellent men to believe that the dream of a state of attainable automatic social harmony is a sound scientific postulate. Why, in view of such a precedent, should not men like Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Roosevelt, taking them merely as conspicuous examples of widespread types of mind,

hope for the finite realisation of a criterion of justice above the law but less than the infinite, and teach uncritical men to hunt for this snark? When Mr. Mitchell says that he looks forward "to the time when right and justice shall be secured for those who toil," or when Mr. Roosevelt sends a message to the people declaring that it shall be the purpose of the executive to see that justice is done between man and man, it may, indeed, be said that what they *mean* is all right enough. And of this I, for one, have small doubt. But, after all, the practical question is: Are such statements taken literally by the generality of men—or not? And, speaking for one again, the evidence that they are usually taken literally is overwhelming—and thereupon rests the main burden of my complaint. Moreover, does their good intention usually keep the distinction clear for those who use the term justice in this determinate fashion? Decidedly not, I should say.

Take the two cases cited above. Each speaker, I suppose, meant only to voice the common desire of men that our social life be more nearly ideal. Neither, it is safe to say, had conscious reference to a perfect social state. Neither used the word justice in the absolute sense. We may assume with equal safety that neither would think of imposing his personal judgment upon others as their criterion of justice. What, then, could they mean by justice? Obviously nothing remains but the relative working sense of the term which civilised men try to embody, as best they can, in the law. And did Mr. Mitchell merely mean that he looked forward to the time when the law should be enforced for the protection of those who toil? Was he advocating the "open shop," and have we all slipped a cog? And did the President get much excited about that state of lawlessness in the anthracite coal fields of which his Commission says: "The practices, which we are condemning, would be outside the pale of civilised war"; and did he throw the immense weight of his influence in the direction of suppressing *that*—or did he try chiefly to settle other men's troubles?

I choose these instances merely for illustration. They are in no wise peculiar. What the President did millions of other excellent men would have done in his place. And I have not here a thought for the merits of that case. I am only trying to suggest, by concrete example, how easily we shift from the absolute to the relative pole, and back and forth, in our thought and speech about justice; and to suggest, also, that the very inadvertency of our slip is what makes it so dangerous and so difficult to combat.

It is not strange that men busy with the world's more concrete work should have fallen into this inadvertency; but should trained philosophers—and Spencer was not one—do as ill or worse?

I suppose there is no answer. The thing is done; it has been done and it doubtless will be done. If men all kept the plain distinction of absolute and relative always before them life would be an affair of judging and act-

ing in a well-recognised direction, and there would be no room for philosophising. I don't say that would be much fun. I don't see how not to say it.

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#### EDITORIAL COMMENT.

We publish Mr. S. D. Merton's letter because philosophers by profession may be interested to know what a layman who tried to post himself in philosophy thinks of the usefulness of their speciality. Mr. Merton expresses the impartial view of a bystander who witnesses the quarrels among the adherents of different philosophical schools, and he gains the impression that philosophers more or less unconsciously avoid agreement and desire controversy. The truth is that many philosophers who are supposed to be antipodes agree much better than they seem to be aware of themselves. It is well known for instance how Kant misinterpreted Berkeley, and it is no exaggeration to say that more than half of the philosophical discussions are due to a lack in the precision of terms. Further, Mr. Merton is right when he proposes to judge philosophers, not from their words, but from their actions, and he finds that pessimists continue to life; pluralists act as if the universe were One; materialists as if it were purposeful, and as if they themselves were persons, etc. We grant that most philosophers hanker after brilliancy while their aim should be clearness and precision. Most of their problems are self-made puzzles and the solutions offered mere verbiage.

The term "justice" is perhaps the most misused word in our language. Every one has his own ideas of justice, and as a rule he understands by justice a full consideration of his own rights to the disregard of others. We cannot discuss the subject here, but we suggest that there is as little sense in speaking of absolute justice as there is in speaking of absolute truth. Reality consists of relations and thus the relative alone is real. The absolute, in the rigid sense of the word, is a fiction.

The same is true of the infinite. Infinitude is not a real thing, not a concrete object, not an actualised existence. To treat infinitude as if it were a thing leads to absurdities. Infinitude is a possibility; it is an unlimited procedure, a state of things fraught with unbounded potentialities. Nothing is infinite, but everything contains infinitude. Man is not infinite, at a given moment he is finite; but he holds infinitude in his soul.

The phrase that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, or that only an infinite being can understand infinitude, is not (as is generally assumed) a truism but a falsehood. Infinitude (I mean the idea of infinitude) is perfectly clear and is even simpler than finitude. Infinitude is only unthinkable if the attempt is made to substantialise it into a concrete thing. In our boldest flight of imagination we cannot represent a thing that is actually